Contemporary Children's Literature Recommendations for Working with Preadolescent Children of Divorce

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Introduction

Bibliotherapy, defined most basically, is helping with books (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). Derived from the Greek words meaning book and therapy, bibliotherapy goals fall usefully into two categories. Clinical bibliotherapy, using books to facilitate specified therapeutic goals with those experiencing significant emotional or behavioral problems, involves trained health and mental health professionals such as psychologists, counselors, psychiatric nurses, or social workers. Developmental bibliotherapy, using books to address situational, transitional, and normal developmental issues, can be implemented by others, like educators or librarians, who work in helping roles. Books provide solace, reassurance, and even escape; they also provide new ideas for problem solving and managing transitions.

Bibliotherapy promotes self-awareness, helps clarify emerging values and the development of a child's ethnic/cultural identity, and even expands a preadolescent individual's appreciation of other cultures and worldviews. For children, bibliotherapy can pull them out of themselves and help to develop empathetic understanding of others. Bibliotherapy assists in generating alternative solutions when none seem apparent. Preadolescents or "tweens" (eight to 12-year-olds), who may be reluctant to disclose concerns or discuss painful feelings related to family matters, find a safe harbor in bibliotherapy; because the intensity is lessened, a preadolescent feels less threatened and often identifies with and talks about characters' feelings and situations as a prelude to dealing with their own. Words in print validate the reality of a preadolescent child's difficulties and the accompanying reactions. Emotions such as anger, anxiety, and loneliness are recognized and often reduced. Self-confidence, communication and relational skills, and emotional development are supported. Books and stories spark discussion and the telling of one's own tale (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005; Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen & Lowe, 2007).

Bibliotherapy is currently experiencing significant growth in use and popularity in many fields (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). In our role as co-founders of the Bibliotherapy Education Project© we are frequently asked by educators, parents, child therapists, and school counselors for book recommendations to help them respond to a wide range of situational, developmental, or emotional problems. Books addressing divorce, separation, and related consequences are commonly requested since such events affect large numbers of young people.

According to census data and family research, the impact of divorce on children is significant. From 1980 to 2008, the percentage of children living in a home with two married parents has dropped from 77% to 67% (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009). These figures mask the full extent of divorce on children since some researchers indicate that children living in two-parent families with stepparents experience similar problems to children living in single-parent families (Child Trends Databank, 2010). Various estimates suggest approximately 750,000 to one million children experience a divorce in their family in a given year. There is abundant evidence that divorce negatively affects academic achievement, emotional, behavioral, and physical well-being (Kramer & Smith, 1998). When divorce-related problems are not addressed in a timely and appropriate manner, the after-effects can persist for years.

Preadolescents are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of divorce for several reasons. Preadolescent development is characterized by numerous transitions; and yet, relationships and social belongingness are key components to healthy psycho-

logical growth for this group (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007). Divorce brings transitions, challenges to feelings of security, and disruptions of important relationships. According to bibliotherapy researcher and practitioner William Pardeck, the benefits of appropriately implemented bibliotherapy are particularly salient for children experiencing divorce (2005). Preadolescents, as a group, often feel themselves too old for picture books; however, they might not be ready to read a chapter book on complex issues on their own. Yet, they are ready to learn how to cope, employing both cognitive and behavioral strategies for dealing with feelings and problems. A well-chosen and well-timed book helps address various questions, concerns and emotions that preadolescents involved in divorce often have (Pehrsson et al., 2007).

There are several factors to bear in mind when evaluating books for potential bibliotherapeutic use. Essentially, both the book and the child must be assessed to determine a good match. The Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool© (http://www.library.unlv.edu/faculty/research/bibliotherapy/reviewformdemo.html) guides the helper in evaluating the format/structure of the book, subject matter, reading level, length, text and pictures, developmental level, diversity factors, and contextual issues. Because identification is one of the key therapeutic mechanisms, characters and situations in the book must be similar enough to those of the child to facilitate this process. The reading skills each child commands as well as his or her emotional and psychological readiness are also important considerations. If the child hasn't yet openly acknowledged that the divorce situation is causing problems for him/her, then using fiction may be preferable to suggesting nonfiction books about divorce. Preadolescents or tweens will have different levels of interest in and ability to read on their own, and this should influence book choice as well as how books are used. As will be indicated in the individual book evaluations that follow, options include using books individually or in a group. If reading skills and interest warrant, giving children books to read on their own, followed by discussion, is an option. Books can also be read aloud to, or along with, an individual or group. Book use serves as a springboard for discussion as well as for any number of creative activities such as drawing, writing, or play-acting.

Methodology

We initially reviewed the last 30 years of education and mental health literature for titles most commonly used by educators and mental health practitioners when working with preadolescent children of divorced families. Given the publication cycle of children's books and professional journal articles, it was hardly surprising that most of the titles identified were over 10 years old. While some titles certainly withstand the test of time, we also wanted to identify more recently published books, having a dominant theme around divorce, that were appropriate for preadolescents.

Our second round of sources for potential book choices were contemporary books on children and divorce, as well as the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD: http://www.childrenslit.com), a subscription online database. We reviewed books most commonly recommended for further reading by the authors of books about children experiencing divorce. Our search of CLCD was limited to those books that had received some level of state, regional, or national recognition through nomination for and/or receipt of awards. Undoubtedly, there are good age-appropriate books addressing the topic of divorce which have not received award attention. Given our intention to evaluate and recommend a small number of books, and our goal that recommended works be easily available to potential readers, imposing this minimal quality restriction seemed in keeping with one major goal of the BEP—to promote book resources that are widely available to helpers and are readily available in public or school libraries.

Using these sources and criteria, 20 books from both fiction and nonfiction genres that were appropriate for eight-to 12-year olds in language and conceptualization levels, were evaluated. Three nonfiction and three fiction works were selected for review here. These six books were chosen because they were of exceptional quality, offered some unique perspective not found in the majority of books, and/or they were so widely cited that we felt it necessary to include them for benchmarking purposes. Nonfiction works are reviewed first, followed by fiction selections; each review provides a brief summary, followed by the strengths, limitations, and recommended bibliotherapeutic uses of the book.

Nonfiction Books for Preadolescents of Divorce

An advantage of using nonfiction books is the abundant research evidence for the effectiveness of self-help or informational literature (Marrs, 1995). One potential drawback of nonfiction is that the child must already be at a point where he or she is explicitly acknowledging a need for help with divorce-related issues for use to

be appropriate. The nonfiction books evaluated ranged from comic book-like formats, to first person accounts of children, to "advice"-type books written by "experts."

***Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* (1986, reissued in 1992 and 2005)**

Written and illustrated by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown, this book has been one of the titles most consistently recommended for preadolescent children (Carlile, 1991; Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, & Money, 2005; Pardeck, 2005; Winchester & Beyer, 2001). First published in 1986 and then reissued in 1992 and 2005, it is obviously popular enough to warrant recent republications. Consequently, we used this as a benchmark for other nonfiction books. Colorful drawings reveal a dinosaur family experiencing the issues common to divorce: marital problems, separation, coping with feelings, custodial arrangements, moving, communication issues, reduced income, parental dating, and stepfamilies.

Strengths. The art and format are comic book-style rows of panels, usually with multiple images on the same page, which is a familiar and appealing presentation for most preadolescents. A table of contents makes it relatively easy to go directly to the issue of concern (e.g., "Having two homes"), although feelings are euphemistically put under the heading "What about you?". A glossary of divorce-related terms is also provided. The images and text seek to normalize events and feelings, which can help preadolescents reduce their sense of isolation and shame.

Limitations. Although the illustrations seem to represent children in our eight to 12-year old range, the short sentence structure may seem condescending for 5th or 6th graders. There are images which promote negative or limited gender-role stereotypes, specifically suggesting that the mother is less able to cope constructively with the divorce. For example, the reader sees the mother reading a romance novel upside down while father reads the newspaper, and she is the parent shown downing pills and martinis and yelling at the kids. Another disturbing image is the one offered for ways to cope with anger; here we see a boy dinosaur tearing the legs off toys and crashing toy airplanes. Although this book offered more constructive ways to deal with anger, this particular image would require that a professional helper discuss it to set more appropriate limits. The small, busy format of the illustrations imposes restrictions on any sort of read-aloud and/or group use of this book

Recommendation for use. Overall there is accurate information in this book which attempts to convey a message of not blaming children for the divorce and reassuring them of parents' continuing love. Dinosaurs are undoubtedly very appealing characters to most children. The language is complex enough that it would require adult assistance for some readers (e.g., separation agreement). The negative images noted above would mitigate against sending preadolescents off to read on their own. The illustration format means it can't effectively be used in a group setting, so reading along with children would be the preferred mode. Although widely used, this is not our most recommended book.

***What Can I Do? A Book for Children of Divorce* (2001)**

This book is written by school counselor Danielle Lowry and illustrated by Bonnie Matthews. When Rosie's parents share the sad news that they will be getting a divorce, she tries to figure out what's wrong and how she can fix it. None of her original "solutions" are successful, so she gives up, becoming withdrawn and angry and acting out at school. Only then does a teacher ask what is wrong and finds out about the family's situation. The teacher suggests Rosie meet with the school counselor, Ms. Gonzalez, to talk about her feelings. Eventually she joins a group of students who meet weekly with the counselor to talk about their families' divorces and to learn positive ways of coping with the situation.

Strengths. Pen-and-ink line drawings by Bonnie Matthews are brought to life with water colors and offer an attractive, realistic presentation of thoughts, feelings and situations from Rosie's point of view. Introduced by a table of contents for the short chapters, this is an accessible text for the age range targeted. The language is not complex but also does not talk down to the preadolescent reader. Because much of this story revolves around relationships and behaviors at school, including interactions with friends, teachers, and a school counselor, this book would be appropriate for a school-based intervention program. The story captures common feelings and reactions of children in divorcing families and in the end offers numerous options for how to deal with these. The protagonist, Rosie, is shown doing things that ultimately won't fix the broken parental relationship, as well as actions that can help her feel better. These situations offer problem-solving models for preadolescents to consider and discuss. One of the author's stated goals for writing this book was to go beyond reassuring the children that the divorce is not their fault and to offer a way to help them feel more in control.

Limitations. We have no significant concerns with the content or presentation of this book. There is no discussion of cultural factors and most characters are drawn in the same light brown skin tone, although the preadolescents in the counseling group at school apparently represent different ethnicities. The reader might conclude that the school counselor, Ms. Gonzalez, is a Latina American based on her name; this may merit discussion, especially if there's any sense that the reader has limited information or negative stereotypes about non-dominant cultures.

Recommendation for use. This was one of our favorite nonfiction books, in part because the process of seeking out a school counselor is presented as a good option for getting help. As the author tells us in the introduction, this book could be used by students reading on their own and by helpers who are working with children of divorce. Further, it can be used by parents who want to open lines of communication and to better understand the perspectives of their children. We agree this format is appropriate for reading alone, for reading along with, or for reading aloud. A facilitated discussion following the reading is always strongly recommended. The illustrations are clear and uncomplicated while still expressive and congruent with the text, adding further therapeutic power. This book is published by a division of the American Psychological Association, Magination Press, thus bolstering its credibility.

***How it Feels when Parents Divorce* (1998)**

This book is essentially a photo essay by Jill Krementz, with first person accounts from 19 boys and girls aged seven to 16 years old. They describe their memories of the divorce, their experiences since then, and how they've felt about it all. They discuss how having a sibling helps buffer the pain of the divorce, how being around parents arguing or being put in the middle of parental fights or communications is incredibly painful, the pros and cons of having to become more independent, how important it is to have some areas of predictability in their lives, and the mixed feelings accompanying parental remarriage and the birth of half siblings.

Strengths. These are very compelling stories, as first person accounts so often are, and the photographs make the individuals real. In some ways, reading this book is like being in a divorce support group because readers are able to hear the different stories from the children themselves. In general, the stories seem to be in the character's own words and there is no explicit interjection by the author/photographer. While children's reactions are commonly distilled into informational books for them, having the tweens say it themselves carries more weight. There are widely diverse stories from kids of various ages, whose parents were divorced at different times in the preadolescents' lives, and who have had a range of experiences with divorce. The diversity within the stories is mirrored by the storytellers themselves (Jewish, Puerto Rican, and African American children). Each story is short, generally only two to three pages, so these accounts are very accessible for kids to read on their own, allowing them to find someone who has experienced similar situations or feelings. There are unique comments and situations presented which serve to broaden consideration of the issues surrounding divorce. Examples include the importance of a relationship with a Big Brother in the case of an absent father, and the additional burden of being an active Catholic and told that divorce is bad by the teachers in a parochial school.

Limitations. There is no doubt that the interviews have been edited somewhat; for example, it seems unlikely that a seven-year-old boy would say about his dad "we would spend many an hour together" (p. 71), but the author/photographer doesn't explicitly intrude and take away from these individuals' stories. There is a wide age range covered, so although readers can probably find someone like themselves in age and/or ethnicity, they may feel there's a lot in here that doesn't apply to them. Helpers should try to get readers past this perception since even the oldest interviewees experienced the divorce when they were younger.

Recommendation for use. The apparent absence of the author makes this a refreshing change from the majority of informational divorce books for children by experts. Even though other books have included comments from youth themselves or hypothetical stories about children, this is a real look into the hearts and minds of those affected by divorce. One example comes from eight-year-old Lulu who says, "... the most important thing for parents to do is to help their children to understand why they got a divorce. They should let them think about the divorce as much as they want and let them ask as many questions as they feel like," (p. 17). Even though this perception was not shared by every individual in the book, imagine how discounted this girl would have felt reading Cynthia MacGregor's (2001) book on divorce in which she says, "There are many different reasons why people get divorced. The reason in your parents' case doesn't really matter. It doesn't change anything. Whatever the reason, you can be sure your parents think it's a good one" (p. 19). Photo essays can be especially compelling, and this one

is no exception. The children's stories are bittersweet, some sad and some hopeful, but all worth reading.

Fiction Books for Preadolescents of Divorce

The beauty of sharing good fiction when working with children affected by divorce is that they don't necessarily have to be ready to admit they are having problems. Much of the professional literature on children and divorce indicates that children sometimes feel so overwhelmed by events that they essentially become numb and deny to themselves and others that anything is wrong. Even if they are consciously aware that they are struggling, they may not want to be seen checking out or reading a book that immediately identifies them as children of divorced families. Fiction can be a stealth approach to surfacing and articulating buried feelings for some preadolescents, while still offering the alternative perspective and problem-solving strategies. Of course suggesting good fiction is also a palatable and beneficial response to those who are explicitly asking for something to read that will help them understand or cope with events or feelings.

***How Tia Lola Came to Visit Stay* (2001)**

Julia Alvarez portrays a family of Dominican descent who were living in New York City until the parents' divorce. Afterwards, nine-year old Julian and his younger sister Juanita move to Vermont with their mother, where she has taken a new job. As if life isn't complicated enough—moving to a rundown house in a small town in the middle of winter and being the new kid in a school with no other brown faces in sight—their mother decides to invite her favorite aunt, Lola, to come from the Dominican Republic to help look after Julian and Juanita while she's at work. So flamboyant in dress and behavior is Tia Lola that Julian at first tries to hide her from the rest of the town. But she soon wins over the children, their friends, the townsfolk and even the old codger from whom they rent their house. Additional divorce-related issues dealt with include diminished financial resources, missing friends, birthdays/holidays, and visiting the non-custodial parent.

Strengths. The story is told from the point of view of nine-year-old Julian and is affectionately humorous in many of the descriptions. Because one character, Tia Lola, speaks no English and the children are trying to learn Spanish, there are words and phrases in Dominican Spanish scattered through the text with proximal explanations, so readers are exposed to or reinforced in language diversity. This book can be used to talk about the kinds of feelings, situations, and issues that commonly surround divorce as well as potential coping strategies. It's not so sophisticated that it will overly challenge this age group but does provide some positive cognitive alternatives such as trying to find the best in people, being proud of one's heritage and working together to achieve goals. Overall, the Dominican culture is positively represented and their values around extended family offer a model for belonging beyond the nuclear family.

Limitations. As commonly happens, the same elements that make this book a wonderful resource for some children may limit its utility for others who may see this story about a Hispanic/Latino family as totally unrelated to them. In that case, adult helpers may initially have to facilitate the identification process by making explicit the similarities in situations and feelings experienced by the characters in the book to those of the readers. Similarly, some may find the inclusion of Spanish words and phrases distracting, while others will relish the opportunity to recognize or learn new words. Some may see Tia Lola as too good to be true, while, for others, her character may offer hope.

Recommendation for use. This is an easy and enjoyable read with a male protagonist which may make it especially appealing to reluctant readers, who are more often boys (Hall & Coles, 1997; Love & Hamston, 2003). Julian has a loving set of parents who both strive to help him and his sister cope with the divorce and their changed circumstances as well as possible. There are no magical solutions, but there are gradual resolutions and acceptance that offer positive models for children to consider. The book is appropriate for reading on one's own, for book groups, or read-alouds, but the utility goes beyond the specific content. The representation of a Dominican family offers the potential for culturally relevant materials for students of Hispanic/Latino descent and/or to expand understanding of this culture by students of other groups. Our endorsement of this book is mirrored by numerous state and national reading organizations.

***Amber Brown is Green with Envy* (2003)**

This is one book in the Amber Brown series by Paula Danziger. Fourth-grader Amber Brown is a "shared custody kid" spending time at her dad's rented house and time with her mom in the house where she grew up, which still feels like the real home. Now she learns that her mom and her mom's boyfriend, Max, want to get married and move to a new house, meaning Amber would have to change schools—in the middle of 4th grade! To top it off, her dad broke his movie date with her to go out with a woman he just met at the grocery store. Boy is she steamed! Amber is envious of the

people that she thinks have "normal" families. Gradually she learns there aren't that many of these around, and maybe her definition of "normal" was a little too narrow.

Strengths. This book deals with many of the typical issues impacting children of divorce: living in two places, parental dating and remarriage, moving, and feeling like people are making the decisions that affect your life without involving you. Amber Brown is convincingly portrayed as a 10-year-old who's had to grow up a lot because of the divorce but is still pretty emotional about all the changes and turmoil in her life. The portrayal of Amber's life is a somewhat humorous and therefore relatively unthreatening story that will appeal to girls who may be having trouble talking to their parents, and Amber models how to do that. She may not always get it right the first time, but she eventually has her say. She trusts and relies on adults and friends to help her, and these relationships offer positive models for readers.

Limitations. Simple black-and-white, cartoon-like drawings by Tony Ross are scattered throughout the text offering us glimpses of Amber Brown and the people, situations, and emotions in her life. Although they enhance the text, the girl in these drawings is clearly Caucasian, something the reader wouldn't necessarily conclude based on the text alone. This limits the interpretation of who this character is and may thus limit with whom you would use the book. Amber is clearly a middle-class kid, and that may make the book resonate for some readers and seem totally irrelevant to the lives of others. Amber is the only character who is fully developed, although readers may gain a complete picture of family members and friends by reading additional books in the series.

Recommendation for use. Amber Brown is a spunky, opinionated role model for girls. This is an easy-to-read and enjoyable story, and there are several more Amber Brown books available for readers wanting more. The book is appropriate for individual reading and groups.

***Sahara Special* (2003)**

Esmé Raji Codell's main character, Sahara, is cruelly nicknamed "Sahara Special" by some classmates because she has been identified as a special needs student. She fails fifth grade and has to repeat, this time with a new teacher, Miss Poitier. The thing is, Sahara is anything but dumb as her mother well knows, for Sahara reads and writes constantly, even if she hides what she writes behind the books at the library and won't do her school work. Since her father left, she doesn't see the point of trying anymore. But "Miss Pointy," as the teacher encourages the children to call her, has her class start writing a journal, and after several days of turning in blank pages, Sahara blurts out: "I am a writer." Miss Pointy responds with, "A writer writes," which says at the same time that she believes Sahara is a writer and is waiting for her to demonstrate it. With this exchange, Sahara gradually begins to emerge from her shell.

Strengths. Sahara is a well-developed and highly-believable character who experiences many of the negative feelings associated with a divorce and the absence of a parent. A child who has been abandoned by a parent will easily identify with Sahara's longing to have the parent return and offer love. Readers may also identify with Sahara's giving up in the face of adults who just don't seem to understand how pointless it all feels. Sahara's turnaround is gradual enough to be believable. She has a pre-occupied but loving and supportive mother, even if she doesn't always fully connect with Sahara's internal world. The strategy of using writing to cope is a good one and the strategy of not trying at all and withdrawing is clearly not serving her well. There's a lot of food for thought and discussion here. There is also some wonderful literary craft in the writing, as when Sahara muses about the books on the library shelves, "But real, live authors wrote every one of those books, so the shelves are like lines of quiet people, sitting up straight and polite, waiting to talk to me" (p. 25). Or when Miss Pointy connects with Sahara's secret life by saying in class, "True things also happen in the imagination" (p. 71).

Limitations. A reader may find Miss Pointy, the supportive and rule-bending teacher, too optimistic, or she may represent a person who is really interested in the reader's world. However, almost everyone will wish they had a "Miss Pointy" as a teacher. The school officials may be portrayed a little too simplistically as villains, but aside from this, there is little to criticize within this book.

Recommendation for use. The students' journal entries are a facsimile of handwriting, complete with occasional bad spelling and grammar. The interactions and dialogue are humorous and occasionally bittersweet. All contribute to an engaging, quick read appropriate for tweens—even reluctant readers will connect with this book. This book can also serve to introduce bibliotherapy used in conjunction with journal writing. The book has chapters that can easily be used week by week for individual or group work. Although there is no specific mention of this character's ethnicity, the reviews, book jacket, and cataloging information generally agree that

Sahara is African American; this may be an additional value when working with African-American children.

Conclusion

There are many good books, both fiction and non-fiction, available to use with preadolescents experiencing divorce. While we didn't find incorrect information in any of the books reviewed, we found some of the stereotypes represented were negative and inappropriate (e.g., *Dinosaurs Divorce*). Stereotyping also results from omission of children's experiences as represented by the many nonfiction books we read that seem targeted to white, middle-class children, e.g., Nancy Holyoke's *Help! A Girl's Guide to Divorce and Stepfamilies* (1999). Other commendable, nonfiction books which offered at least some ethnic diversity include: *Why Do Families Break Up?* (2005) by Jane Bingham; *Divorce* (2002) by Janine Amos; and *How Do I Feel About My Parents' Divorce?* (1998) by Julia Cole. Winchester and Beyer's (2001) book, *What in the World Do You Do When Your Parents Divorce?*, was the only one we found that raised the issue of adopted children also being affected by divorce. Another red flag when evaluating books was that some wrote down to tweens by using condescending language (e.g., the frequent use of "it's not that simple" in Cynthia MacGregor's book), absolute statements, or very simple sentence structure. We obviously found the formats and writing styles of some informational books more appealing than others, and these were the ones chosen for discussion.

In the fiction category, we selected titles which had received some level of critical acclaim, and as a result, the majority of books evaluated made for enjoyable reading. We chose books with main characters from non-dominant cultures for two of our three reviews; however, there were several others worth reading: *Dear Mrs. Ryan, You're Ruining My Life* (2000) by Jennifer Jones; *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983; reissued 2000) by Beverly Cleary; *Dark Sons* (2005) a Coretta Scott King Honor Book by Nikki Grimes; *Family Reunion* (1989; reissued 2004) by Caroline Cooney; and, one of our personal favorites, *How I Became a Writer and Oggie Learned to Drive* (2002) by Janet Taylor Lisle.

Our intent was to whet the appetites of those who use bibliotherapy with preadolescents by presenting several easily available resources that address family dissolution. At the Bibliotherapy Education Project© website (http://www.library.unlv.edu/faculty/research/bibliotherapy/) we are always eager to have educators, counselors, and other helpers working with children and young adults submit their evaluations of books. We believe by building a publicly accessible database of evaluations, more people—readers and helpers—will become aware of quality materials for use in bibliotherapy. The growing population of preadolescent children dealing with divorce, and those who work with them as they seek to heal and learn, will be provided with lots of options for thoughtfully selected children's literature.

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The authors are co-founders of the Bibliotherapy Education Project© (BEP).